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Ramadan event draws officials

Montgomery County Muslim Council aims to ramp up awareness about Muslim culture

by Erin Donaghue | Staff Writer

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County Executive Isiah Leggett, County Councilman George Levanthal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, Del. Brian Feldman (D-Dist. 15) of Potomac and Del. Craig Rice (D-Dist. 15) of Germantown were a just a few of the 100 attendees Friday at the Montgomery County Muslim Council's annual Iftaar dinner. At the event, members of the Gaithersburg-based group gathered in Potomac to eat together after fasting all day.

Area Muslims will fast daily this September during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"[Ramadan] is a time of spiritual renewal, a time of introspection and a lot of additional worship," said Mustafa Haque, a member of the MCMC, a grassroots organization aimed at involving Muslims with the larger Montgomery County community.

Haque said that Muslims often gather together to break their fast, which is usually sustained from an hour before sunrise until sundown and also prohibits smoking and chewing gum. For the past several years, the Muslim council has held the celebration at the home of Tufail Ahmad, a council member and a leader within the Muslim community in the county. "Muslims try to get together as a group or a small party to break their fast, especially on weekends," Haque said.

The Muslim community in the county, as well as within the greater Washington Metropolitan area, is on the rise, according to the MCMC.

The group invited community members, local elected officials, and members of the media to Friday's Iftaar in order to increase understanding within the community about Muslim culture and traditions, according to Ahmad.

"We invited these leaders so they could see what we do and how we pray, and the culture and custom of Ramadan," Ahmad said.



Chris Rossi/The Gazette
Attendees at the Montgomery County Muslim Council's annual Ramadan Iftaar dinner perform Mughrab, a prayer before breaking the fast, Friday at a home in Potomac.



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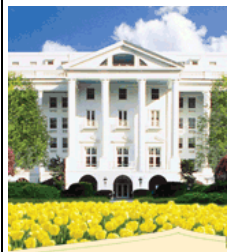
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MCMC member Rashid Makhdoom said that community outreach is one way to combat misconceptions about Muslims. "There has been some apprehension because people think we are different," Makhdoom said. "We feel that due to lack of knowledge and rumors, misconceptions are allowed to grow.... We are just as much a part of the American political and cultural scene as anyone else."

Aquilur Rahman, chair of the group's board of directors, agreed. "Muslims should not be looked down upon as only radicals or terrorists," he said.

Lily Qi, a community liaison in the County Executive's Office of Community Partnerships, praised faith-based groups such as the Montgomery County Muslim Council for actively involving themselves in dialogues with the community at large, as well as with other faith groups. "They don't sit back and passively wait for people to understand them," Qi said. "They understand what's at stake and they know they are often misperceived."

Another key aspect to the council's activities at Ramadan is charitable giving and caring for the homeless and hungry. During Ramadan, the group usually gathers to serve food at a homeless shelter. While in past years, the group has worked in Washington, this year it donated time to the Sophia House Assessment Center for Women, a short-term shelter in Rockville.

The group prepared enough food for a week's worth of meals for the women at the 30-bed shelter.

The council also conducts charitable activities throughout the year — donating toys to children at Christmas and collecting food for organizations like the Manna Food Center in Rockville. In December, the group will celebrate the Muslim holiday of Eid-UI-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice, by donating meat to the needy.

"Our members realize that this is the most essential thing we have to do is to be participants and productive members of the community," Rahman said. "It gives you a real satisfaction."

The group also hopes that attending the Iftaar is an eye-opening experience for the non-Muslims in attendance. "It's a nice chance for them to get a feel for Muslim culture," Haque said.

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